

ARTICLE

The unbelieved and historians, part III: Responses and elaborations

Roland Clark¹  | Luke Clossey²  | Simon Ditchfield³  |
David M. Gordon⁴ | Arlen Wiesenthal⁵ | Taymiya R. Zaman⁶

¹University of Liverpool

²Simon Fraser University

³University of York

⁴Bowdoin College

⁵University of Chicago

⁶University of San Francisco

Correspondence

Roland Clark, History, University of Liverpool,
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern
Ireland.

Email: roland.clark@liverpool.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The first two parts of "The Unbelieved" argued for the possibility of the existence of supernatural beings and for their agency in historical writing. This instalment is a roundtable assessing the problems and potential in the category of the Unbelieved and in its knowability. Space limitations prevented our following the rich avenues of further inquiry our extraordinary peer reviewers suggested, but we remain grateful, especially for their reminders of the complexity of motivations of historians who avoid the Unbelieved and their emphasis on the importance of humility as a historian's tool.

1 | THE AGENCY OF THE UNKNOWN (DAVID M. GORDON)

My book *Invisible Agents* critiques those approaches to non-Western religions and spirituality that focus on symbolic meanings, metaphors, or analogies, typical of the modes of interpretation developed in modern anthropology and in biblical exegesis. Africanist scholars, in particular, pioneered anthropological interpretations of religion. They identified spiritual beliefs as functioning cogs in African societies. By doing so, anthropologists wanted to demonstrate the contextual rationality of belief. These interpretations have flourished in scholarship ranging from E.E. Evans-Pritchard to recent neo-functionalists. They ignore that many societies viewed spirits as dysfunctional, disruptive, this-worldly (as opposed to other-worldly nature of Judeo-Christian religion), and rarely in terms of symbol or functionality. Even as my work built on new approaches in anthropology and generated some support, its broad-ranging critique drew the ire of a few scholars of religion. I welcome the opportunity that that Clossey et al. have provided for further discussion in reference to our shared critique of the explaining away of the agency of the supernatural.

My book grappled with the attribution of agency. The title, *Invisible Agents*, implies the agency of spirits themselves, and that is how I wrote parts of the book. However, in the theoretical overview, I describe a collective imagination, arguing that humans still held agency, and were inspired by their imaginings of an invisible world. Clossey et al. called for a recognition of the agency of the Unbelieved themselves. Should we treat the unknown and unseen as

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2017 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

agents or do we principally describe an imagination that inspires the agency of living beings? If the former, what evidentiary criteria enable the historian to proclaim their agency?

The discussion is part of an even broader debate over to whom and to what historians should attribute agency. Historiography now expands agency to non-human actors: recent environmental historians finds agency in geography and animals, for example. Further transformations in our understanding of agency might be expected as historians confront object-oriented ontologies that reject anthropocentrism.

What, then, of the "Unbelieved"? First, let us be clear about what we are discussing. Clossey et al. choose to term "supernatural beings" the "Unbelieved" in reference to the views of secularists. If the frame is shifted to the perspective of societies in which such phenomena exist, the label "Unbelieved" reveals less. All terms at a great degree of generalization have strikes against them, but at essence we are dealing with phenomena that are imperfectly known. Even while we are capable of describing a fraction of any given reality, there are some phenomena that exhibit greater unknowability and mystery, even to those who assert their existence. If unknowability is a key quality, the possible *reality* of the Unbelieved is less important than their *unreality*. In my book I chose to discuss the "invisible." An invisible world might be visible to some, but only to those with remarkable perspicacity and with the aid of technologies and medicines. What agency can the invisible and the unknowable exert?

Other non-human agents—identities, animals, geographies, or even visible objects—exert their influence in particular ways, depending on their qualities. The unknown has to become known to exert agency it. Rendering the unknown known and invisible visible is an imaginative act par excellence (note, however, I am emphasizing imagination, not invention). By emphasizing the imagination, the conundrum of the supernatural as products of the imagination versus real agents returns. One way out of this problem is to recognize that the principal realm of agency for the unknown is the imagination. In making this claim, it is worth going back to one of the originators of the secularist approach to religion, with whom open-minded skeptics can find common ground. Emile Durkheim (1995, pp. 425–6) described the religious imagination as part of a collective consciousness that was a synthesis of "a whole world of feelings, ideas, and images....and none of these combinations is directly commanded and necessitated by the state of underlying reality." The invisible and unknown, autonomous of an "underlying reality," act through visible beings by inspiring their imaginations, which, in turn, leads to action. This is not to deny the reality of spiritual and invisible forces, but nor does it necessitate their reality; it finds common ground between anthropocentrism and deicentrism. The invisible exerts power through or alongside living visible beings, hardly ever independently of them. One of their principal fields of action is the human imagination.

But what of invisible agents that act independently of the human imagination? Across much of Africa, spirits afflict people by causing sickness in them, forcing them into labor, and even having sexual intercourse with them. Technologies of warfare employed in central Africa over the last century are said to have turned bullets into water (or should we omit the passive qualifier, "are said to"?). Supernatural beings become visible agents in many myths (or should we write "histories"?). The Holy Spirit heals bodies in massive Pentecostal revivals. What evidentiary criteria apply to such accounts of supernatural agency? The historian cannot establish certainty, and should thus avoid claiming to do so. These phenomena are in the realm of the unknown, and should remain there.

Defining the supernatural as the "Unbelieved" confronts the dogmatism of secularists. The authors cite examples of secular prejudices in professional historiography. I, too, was accused of writing a *Lord of the Rings* history. Critiques are also not without political overtones. Reviewers of my book, driven by a well-meaning sentiment that African beliefs are not primitive, claim that I exoticize Africans by representing their spirits as supernatural agents rather than as symbols or as functional beliefs. These reviewers ignore that such beliefs only appear exotic and primitive to their secular worlds. I thus sympathize with Clossey et al.'s approach. Yet, I would also urge us to move beyond the frame of reference defined by the unbelievers, and consider replacing the "Unbelieved" with the "unknown," which better captures the quality of the phenomena under discussion. After all, by insisting that we are discussing the unknown, the secularists have to confront their refusal to even acknowledge its existence.

2 | "ON THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF HISTORY?" (TAYMIYA R. ZAMAN)

Historians work with provable truths. We mine our sources for information and mime the methods of science in discarding the role of supernatural beings as historical actors. As a historian of Mughal India, I am often asked by religious students if God could have granted victory to one king rather than another and my response is that this is possible, but since we can't prove it, nor can we know the mysterious motives of God, they are not to bring God into their papers.

The challenge posed to historians by the article "The Unbelieved and Historians" is welcome because it forces us to examine both the dogmatic secularism of our discipline and the power exercised by this dogmatism in subduing other epistemologies, including medieval ones, that allowed gods and spirits to exercise historical agency. Through a reading of the Santal rebellion in India in 1855, the authors write that historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty recommend anthropologizing subaltern beliefs in supernatural beings, such as Thakur, who Santals credit with inspiring their rebellion.

While in agreement with the call to question the dogmatic secularism of our discipline, I read Chakrabarty differently. I do not think Chakrabarty is saying we *should* not give the supernatural a place in our explanations; he is saying that the constraints of our discipline do not allow us to do so. Interestingly, while the authors view Ranajit Guha as occasionally writing outside of modern secularism, Chakrabarty views Guha's position on the Santal rebellion as "a combination of the anthropologist's politeness—'I respect your beliefs but they are not mine'—and a Marxist (or modern) tendency to see 'religion' in modern public life as a form of alienated or displaced consciousness" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 105). The constraints of history are the subject of Chakrabarty's inquiry just as they are the subject of the authors' and a discussion of these constraints can lead to productive debate about how we might imagine doing history while attuning ourselves to the unfamiliar rhythms, presences, and voices of the past in a spirit of receptivity.

The authors write that the transition from medieval epistemologies to Enlightenment epistemologies meant that skepticism, once meant to question all knowledge, soon outlawed some forms of knowledge as obviously false, and deemed others dogmatically unquestionable. It is implicit in the authors' insightful assertions that these very epistemologies formed the corpus of colonial writing on India. As post-colonial historians of India's pasts, we are left to grapple with a complicated inheritance in which we—as historians—impose the same secular epistemologies on our subjects once imposed upon India by colonizing powers.

Edward Said, who deconstructed European constructs of its irrational, superstitious Eastern other, himself argued that a true intellectual is a secular being (Said, 1994, p. 120). In my own field, the influence of Said has meant that we have traditionally shied away from addressing "irrational" beliefs about dreams, miracles, and sacred kingship, determined to prove that rationality was not simply the intellectual domain of Europeans (Moin, 2012, pp. 12-13). This defensiveness has relegated to the shadows animating forces in which we are supposed to no longer believe, even though our ancestors did. Colonialism has also meant that texts from the Mughal past can be objects of study, but we cannot allow ourselves to be shaped by their epistemologies.

Chakrabarty urges that our "secular universals" be "open to their own finitude" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 90) and suggests that subaltern pasts, in which time is non-linear and the world is enchanted by the spirits of the dead or the voices of gods, can "help us distance ourselves from the imperious instincts of the discipline—the idea that everything can be historicized or that one should *always* historicize." The Santal can offer us "illuminating possibilities for our own life-worlds" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 112). I am interested in these possibilities. What if we were to allow the texts we study to inform our relationship to knowledge, or allow ourselves to be a conduit for a different life world to come through rather than deciding we must arrange these worlds into the believable and the Unbelieved?

We spend a great deal of time in the presence of the dead. We read their handwriting, engage with their thoughts, and even have conversations with them, but we pay no attention to ritual. We don't burn candles or cover mirrors or pray together on the fortieth day. But as secular mediators between the living and the dead, we communicate to others what people from the past might have wanted. Conversely, the relation of writers, painters, and musicians to their craft still invokes the dynamic convergence between *techné* and *epistémè* in ancient philosophy (Parry, n.d.).

Instead of seeing *techne* as practice and *episteme* as theory, and the two as different, we could inhabit what Toni Morrison calls "the nonsecular space" of creativity, in which the practice of the craft is integral to how we know. In reference to rituals that accompany the writer—a cup of coffee exactly at the hour when dark gives ways to light, in Morrison's case—she writes: "Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process" (Morrison, 1993). This process of receptivity to mystery, I submit, cannot help but call for an act of faith.

3 | DIVINE SUBJECTIVITIES (ROLAND CLARK)

There is an anecdote, which may or may not have any empirical basis, about an English missionary who was visiting an Aboriginal tribe in Australia's remote north. The Aborigines told him about the Dreamtime, and about their close bond to the land. One man pointed to a canyon and said, "That canyon is my mother. My mother conceived when she was passing through that place and I look after it because I am its child." The dubious missionary told them that "in my country, we believe that when a man and woman love each other very much..." If you are familiar with modern theories about human reproduction then you will already know most of what followed. His Aboriginal interlocutor stared at him in disbelief: "Of course we know that," he said, "I was trying to explain something much deeper."

The danger with arguing about whether the Unbelieved are real or unreal is that it marginalizes what is perhaps the most significant thing about them – their mystery. Very few people, in any time or place, relate to demons, spirits, and gods in the same ways that they relate to ordinary human beings. The truths of the Unbelieved are deeper, less easily penetrated and less certifiable than other truths. Claims about the Unbelieved necessarily involve elements of the apophatic. Their power lies in their mystery. When rejecting Dogmatic Secularism it is important not to ignore the doubt, ignorance, or indifference which some people in every society approach the Unbelieved. Nor should we ignore the choices about the nature of reality that believers make. As we incorporate the Unbelieved into our historical narratives we must do so in ways that respect their uniqueness; never introducing them as the equals of other historical actors. Frequently, they are much more.

Over the course of the twentieth century Christian theologians increasingly abandoned speaking about God in terms of His "reality," and turned to relational language about God and His Word as a "gift" or an "event" (Milbank, 1997, p. 36). In many cases there is as much historical evidence for the Unbelieved as there is for more mundane things (Wright, 1992), but historians are shy of acknowledging this because doing so requires us to engage with those beings in ways we may be uncomfortable with. Just as the Dreamtime matters for the missionary's Aboriginal informant, God matters to Christians because of the existential claims that He makes on their lives. These are rarely claims that can be certified by the methods of modern science, and because historians work with various degrees of probability, neither are they claims that will emerge from a reconstruction of the past (Harvey, 1966). Here we find ourselves in the realm of faith, of "assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:3).

When thinking about the Unbelieved in terms of mystery and relationship, historians could usefully learn from theologians and Biblical scholars, who have been wrestling with the Unbelieved for much longer than we have. Walter Brueggemann is one such scholar. A celebrated student of the Old Testament whose career spanned almost half a century, Brueggemann (2006, pp. 76-77) argues for an understanding of prophecy as speech that is

so daring as to specify concrete places where the presence, purpose, and reality of God's "otherness" make decisive inroads on the human process in either friendly or hostile ways. It names the places where intrusion, gift, ambiguity, and newness are present, and it gives to those happenings the name of holiness, either holy graciousness or holy judgment.

Brueggemann makes us attentive to the forms of power being articulated and criticized in prophecy, and to the unique communities that prophetic utterances call into being. More than simply stating that the Unbelieved exist, Brueggemann unpacks their discourses, asks what they wanted, and tries to discover how others responded to them.

As Raymond E. Brown pointed out, simply acknowledging that the Unbelieved are real has little explanatory power. Among other things, Brown is famous for calling into question the historicity of the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Brown was an ordained Catholic priest whose work received the Vatican's approval for publication and was praised by Pope Benedict XVI despite the latter's belief that the Virgin Birth was an historical event. Brown considered disbelief in miracles "unscientific," but also insisted on interrogating speech about God. Matthew and Luke wove together oral traditions about Jesus' birth into their infancy narratives because, Brown said, those stories contained "the essence of the Good News, namely, that God has made Himself present to us in the life of His Messiah who walked on this earth, so truly present that the birth of the Messiah was the birth of God's Son" (1979, p. 8). "Of course," Brown noted, "Matthew could have written an impersonal summary of Israel's history [to introduce Jesus' ministry]; but he chose to make the preparation more intimate by having Jesus relive that history" (Brown, 1979, p. 231). Moreover, suggests Brown, first-century readers understood precisely what the Gospel writers were doing. It is we moderns who insist on reading them as biographies rather than as *kerygma* and theology. Writing about God takes many forms, and not all speech about the Unbelieved is supposed to be taken literally. Critical engagement with the Unbelieved must go beyond denying or asserting the possibility of their existence: We still have much to learn about them and their interactions with human societies.

4 | FROM ABSENCE TO "CONDENSED PRESENCE" (SIMON DITCHFIELD)

Robert Orsi (2016) has recently argued that unseeing the Gods has become a foundational requirement for Western Modernity. For him their presence has come to be associated with superstition, the primitive and the irrational – in a word, with the "unmodern". Accordingly, he believes that historians need to re-learn how to see them again. This is all rousing stuff; but Orsi's clarion call needs to acknowledge more fully than it has done the degree to which historians have already challenged Max Weber's narrative of the "disenchantment of the World."¹ Here Bob Scribner's (Scribner, 1986) recovery for our attention of the cult of "incombustible Luther" now over thirty years ago was a game-changer. Subsequently, scholars have drawn our attention to the enduring presence of the miraculous in post-Reformation, Protestant culture more generally (e.g. Soergel, 2012 and Walsham, 2011). This revisionism has been accompanied, more recently, by renewed appreciation of the degree to which the practice of "holy seeing" (or "auspicious sight") of the divine remained (and remains) significant not only to Christianity (e.g. Spicer, 2012, and Heal, 2014; cf. Eck, 1998, and Eck, 2012). Indeed, the 'un-disenchantment of the world' might even now be considered the new orthodoxy for us historians of pre-modern religion.

But such a rehabilitation of the material culture associated with the Unbelieved – from reliquaries to grapho-relics; altarpieces to agnus deis – is not the same as acknowledging their agency.² The "material turn" has (to date) only taken us so far. Moreover, at least in pre-modern – or should I say, late traditional – history there is the risk of replacing a whig, secularising narrative with a circular, self-referential one which simply says that people believed because they believed. As if to prove my point, claims "to see things their way" have, until now, mostly have come from apologists for some kind of (usually fairly mainstream) religious denomination (e.g. Chapman, Coffey, & Gregory, 2009). Where does this leave those of us non-dogmatic atheists who think that the Unbelieved should be reclaimed for serious study by more mainstream practitioners of the historian's craft, yet without doing violence to their epistemological integrity?

This can only be done if we historicise belief more thoroughly and acknowledge the degree to which Western thought has associated reasoned belief with what it means to be human. Aristotle (1984, p. 1588 (1006a)), in book IV of his *Metaphysics*, made this clear when he wrote:

"it is absurd to attempt to reason with one who will not reason about anything, in so far as he refuses to reason. For such a man, as such, is seen already to be no better than a mere plant."

Although Aristotle's target had been the Sophists, for Manuel de Nóbrega (1517-70), first provincial of the Society of Jesus in Brazil, who would have read him as a student of canon law and philosophy at the University of

Coimbra, his relevance was only too plain to see. As the Jesuit missionary put it himself in his Dialogue on the Conversion of the Heathen:

Do you know what is the greatest difficulty I find in them? Being so easy to say "yes" to everything... They approve of everything right away, and with same ease with which they say "yes," they say "no." (Nóbrega, 1556-57/1956 as quoted in Viveiros de Castro, 2011, p. 7).

Almost exactly a century later, in a sermon of 1657, another Jesuit missionary to Brazil, António Vieira (1608-97), adopted what was substantially the same line of reasoning: "Other people are unbelieving until they believe; the Brazilians, even after they have come to believe, are unbelieving" (Vieira, 2000, p. 423). Here both the capacity for belief and the need to be believed are shown to be at sine qua non of the process for successful Christian conversion. Indeed, Nóbrega linked belief directly with obedience, or as Pierre Veyne (1988, p. 32) put it succinctly: "to believe is to obey." Since the Tupinambá, whom the Jesuit missionary tried to convert, did not have a king to obey, they could not worship a sovereign God (Nóbrega, 1556-57, as cited in Viveiros de Castro, 2011, p. 42).

For the Brazilian anthropologist, Edoardo Viveiros de Castro, to whom I am indebted for the above case study, it makes little sense to say that resistance of the Tupinambá to Jesuit attempts to convert them: "came not from their religion but from their culture." This is because the Geertzian idea of "religion as a cultural system" itself "presupposes an idea of culture as a religious system" (Viveiros de Castro, 2011, p. 12). By viewing culture in this way, as a "system of beliefs," anthropologically informed historians have merely perpetuated what is effectively a category error. If instead, following Viveiros de Castro, we view culture not as a "system of beliefs," but instead as a "a set of potential structurings of experience" then perhaps the "Unbelieved" will stand a better chance of being taken seriously and made visible (once again).

"To the faithful, absence is condensed presence." This quotation is taken from a letter from the poet Emily Dickinson (1830-86) to her sister-in-law, Susan. It is deployed by William Taylor (2016, p. 3) in the introduction to his important new study of miraculous shrines and images in New Spain to make the point that if we are to understand them we need to regard their place in the world: "not so much as settings or containers of activity, [but] as ongoing creations from accumulating experiences, memories and meanings." Such an approach requires that we address the means by and through which such significant sites and objects found, made and maintained their place. This attentiveness to the experience of believers and their actions has long been a hallmark of this most thoughtful of scholars, for whom Darśan—holy seeing—has been a central concern for several decades. Here all the senses came into play: not only the sight of miracles and the light of candles; the smell of incense and flowers and the touch of holy objects worn smooth by handling—Taylor (2016, p. 552) quotes Juana Inés de la Cruz: "I only see what I touch"—but also by means of physical movement: "processions, dance, postures of prayer and penitence...[even] the act of dressing and cleaning an image." It is only by engaging with the Unbelieved in such a broad-ranging fashion; which takes full account of hetero/orthopraxy as well as hetero/orthodoxy that we will be able to restore agency to the "Unbelieved."

5 | BELIEVABILITY, KNOWABILITY, AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (LUKE CLOSSEY AND ARLEN WIESENTHAL)

As several of our contributors have argued, the very act of categorizing the Unbelieved as such imposes an external generalization that tells us little about them aside from how they are viewed by the selectively skeptical academy. From any perspective but modern secularism, the beings we call "Unbelieved" are strange bedfellows, with angels indignantly sharing a category with demons and fairies.

While our category is a catch-all meant to include all of the phenomena denied agency and historicity by the moral economies of the mainstream academy, we must not confuse it with the plurality of the Unbelieved themselves. The category is a tool to remind historians of whom, adapting the bishop of Magdeburg's words about his ex-

Communist parishioners, "they have forgotten that they have forgotten" (Noack, 2001, p. 4). The authors of the first part of these essays preferred "Unbelieved" over "Unbelievable" in the hopes that the category would prove temporary, as we eventually think beyond our nihilistic dogmas. Its utility is thwarted if its fighting-weight broadness and bluntness obscures the specificity and uniqueness of the historical content it is meant to defend.

In any case, we are not arguing for the uncritical assumption of the reality of the Unbelieved. Instead we urge historians to refrain from disbelief in them *a priori*, and entertain the possibility they might be more seamlessly incorporated into historical narrative. Our project is less about ascertaining the "truth" of the Unbelieved than about their tenability for inclusion in historical narratives and in methodological calculations.

As Gordon and Clark astutely note, many things exist beyond the purview of analytical reckoning and may be best left out of the explanatory framework of "mundane" historical causality. Given their extraordinary nature, the attempts of even well-intentioned historians to accommodate them into scholarship risks obscuring or ignoring their rarefied place in the universe. This reminder is helpful, but perhaps it need not restrain us from investigating all the diverse Unbelieved. Not all beings, circumstances, and processes that fall into our Unbelieved category were considered unusual by the peoples who encountered them. Some were extraordinary; some were ordinary.

If there is a sizable scholarly consensus that certain "Unbelievable" elements of the past cannot be unproblematically assimilated into the set of "rationally-defensible position[s] in public life" (Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 4), we would do well to consider which "rationalities" and "publics" we represent in our writing, and to what ends. If our nagging sense of historical continuity incites us to exclude these beings, processes, and events from our writing (if there are no miracles around today, how could they have occurred in the past?), we would do well to remember that the beliefs of the mainstream academy are markedly different from those of the vast majority of the world's population, who continue to observe miracles and other "Unbelievable" things with considerable frequency.

The denial of the historicity of the Unbelieved, as Zaman puts it, involves our "mim[ing] the methods of science," and especially "modern science," as it appears to us today. In this way, we uncritically reproduce the epistemologies and ontologies of a particular way of knowing and infuse it into our historical narratives and analytical categories. Consequently, we insinuate that the presence of this scientific worldview is something natural, and that its value and utility to the ends we pursue as historians is beyond question. Although we have long navigated the selective inclusion of theological and social-scientific methodologies with differing degrees of accommodation, the adoption of a modern secular-scientific worldview is rarely questioned or discussed despite its particularity (it is not a default approach but rather a specific and historically contingent one) and its many consequences, like the Unbelieved's exclusion.

Our contributors remind us of the long tradition in Western thinking of limiting who can use reason (animals? Brazilians?) and what reason can achieve (knowledge of God?). Our discussion today is informed by its own complex past. "History" as an academic discipline practiced in modern scholarly institutions may well have originated as a "European" project replete with the epistemologies and ontologies of the nineteenth-century North-Atlantic world, but it need not remain restricted by them. While studies by Joan Scott and Bonnie Smith have explicated and critiqued many of the foundational assumptions of the modern historical profession, its foundational rationalism, grounded as it is in a selective Enlightenment skepticism, continues to reproduce a rigid secularist ontology devoid of miracles, spirits, demons, dragons, vampires, and other things that so coloured the lives of past peoples. To our mind, this selective application of emphatic doubt arguably reinforces the contemporary perspectives, prerogatives, and moral economies of the mainstream academy, and sheds little light on the past exigencies of the world, whether or not it "actually existed." Moreover, it runs contrary to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (Trouillot, 1995, p. 106) call "to generate a new perspective that encompasses the best" of both minority-subaltern and Western academic perspectives, a project that hinges on the methodological flexibility of historians and their openness to the experiences and ideas of historical people.

As Zaman argues, the proximity of the discipline of academic history to the European colonial encounter has created an environment wherein the past can provide us with dead "objects of study" but should not supply us with instructive

and transformative epistemologies for our lives and our scholarship. In contrast to this trend, we suggest that historians attempt to infuse their histories with the perspectives available to them despite how untenable these ideas may seem to us moderns. The profession's widespread discounting the truth of content, especially content that is "pre-modern" and (in an area-studies sense of phrase) "non-Western," risks precluding understudied historical ideas from entering into our methodological toolboxes, a phenomenon which, we suggest, is a subtle byproduct of Eurocentrism's ongoing hold on academic history. Knowledges currently alien to the academy ought to be welcomed into its purview—even perhaps at the expense of its overall methodological coherence and the "anarchy" that might ensue.

What might this anarchy look like? Are the Unbelieved truly unknowable? Perhaps the way forward is less confidence in our ability to know the humans, animals, and plants that we typically include in our histories. In practice, historians of the Believed (or "non-Unbelieved"?) work less with provable truths than with highly (sometimes overly) educated guesses, and probabilistic extrapolations from our sources, experiences, and assumptions, all themselves unreliable. Ditchfield encourages us to look beyond people's belief to practice. Can we extend that advice to include even the practices of the Unbelieved? What adjustments, if any, do we need to make to our usual Believed-methodology to make an Unbelieved-methodology? Gordon sportingly considers calling myths "histories"; what if we think of our histories as "myths"?

Shrouded by uncertainty, buried under oblivion, Napoleon, the angel Gabriel, and an anonymous nineteenth-century Laotian peasant woman are all fundamentally beyond our grasp. Like Juana Inés de la Cruz, invoked by Ditchfield, historians can only see what they touch, but we touch sources, not beings. Ontologically Gabriel is exceptional, but epistemologically the Laotian woman is the odd one out—and historians work through epistemology.

The ultimate unknowability of the Unbelieved is matched by the ultimate unknowability of the Believed. Sienkiewicz described the Pontic steppe, where "[i]t took an experienced ear to tell the difference between the ordinary baying of the wolves and the howl of vampires." There it was difficult to distinguish between human and Unbelieved, since "living men, as secretive about their business as the restless spirits, were just as likely to appear and vanish in that spectral country as genuine apparitions" (Sienkiewicz, 1992, p. 6). The past is a spectral country. We propose that a true skepticism, embracing both humans and Unbelieved, can create a level playing field, a stage for a history more comprehensive and inclusive than we have been writing in recent centuries.

Endnotes

¹ See Walsham, 2008 for a useful historiographical mise a jour.

² I borrow the term 'grapho-relics' from Rublack, 2010. On *Agnus Dei* see see Panfili, 1556 and Panvinio, 1560. Cfr. Nelles, 2017.

ORCID

Roland Clark  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3292-282X>

Luke Clossey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8920-7387>

Simon Ditchfield  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1691-0271>

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. (1984). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Complete Works: the Revised Oxford Translation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, R. E. (1979). *The Birth of the Messiah*. New York: Image.
- Brueggemann, W. (2006). *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Chakrabarty, D. (1998). Minority Histories, Subaltern Past. In *Scrutiny2* (Vol. 3) (pp. 4–15).
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chapman, A., Coffey, J., & Gregory, B. S. (2009). *Seeing Things Their Way. Intellectual history and the Return of Religion*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (K. E. Fields, Trans. New York: Free Press.

- Eck, D. L. (1998). *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (3rd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eck, D. L. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Harmony.
- Harvey, V. (1966). *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*. New York: Macmillan.
- Heal, B. (2014). Seeing Christ: Visual Piety in Saxony's Erzgebirge. In J. C. Smith (Ed.), *Visual Acuity and the Arts of Communication in Early Modern Germany* (pp. 43–60). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Milbank, J. (1997). *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Moin, A. (2012). *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Morrison, T. (1993). The Art of Fiction No. 134. Interview by Elissa Schapell with additional material from Claudia Brodsky Lacour. *The Paris Review*, 128. Retrieved from: <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/toni-morrison-the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison>
- Nelles, P. (2017). *The Information Order: Writing, Mobility and Distance in the Making of the Society of Jesus, (1541-76)*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Noack, A. Sie haben vergessen, daß sie Gott vergessen haben. *ideaSpektrum* (Sept. 21, 2001), n.p.
- da Nóbrega, M. (1556-57/1956). Diálogo sobre a Conversão do Gentio. In S. Leite (Ed.), *Cartas dos Primeiros Jesuítas dos Brasil – II* (1553-58) (pp. 317-45). São Paulo: n. p.
- Orsi, R. (2016). *History and Presence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Panfilii, G. (1556). *L'origine del consacrare gli Agnus Dei con le virtù che in quelli si contengono*. Rome: Blado.
- Panvinio, O. (1560). *De baptisate Paschali et origine consecrandi Agnus Dei*. Rome: Blado.
- Parry, R. (n.d.). Episteme and Techne. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition). E. N. Zalta (Ed.). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/episteme-techne/>
- Rublack, U. (2010). Grapho-Relics, Lutheranism and the Materialization of the Word. In A. Walsham (Ed.), *Relics and Remains* (pp. 144–166). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Said, E. (1994). *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage.
- Scribner, R. (1986). Incombustible Luther: The Image of the Reformer in Early Modern Germany. *Past and Present*, 110, 38–68.
- Sienkiewicz, H. (1992). *With Fire and Sword*. W. S. Kuniczak, trans. New York: Hippocrene.
- Soergel, P. (2012). *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonderbook in Reformation Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spicer, A. (Ed) (2012). *Lutheran Churches in Early Modern Europe*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Taylor, W. B. (2016). *Theater of a Thousand Wonders: A History of Miraculous Shrines and Images in New Spain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trouillot, M. (1995). An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (pp. 70–107). Boston: Beacon.
- Veyne, P. (1988). *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Vieira, A. (2000-2001). *Sermões* (A. Pécora, Ed.). São Paulo: Editora Hedra.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2011). *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul: The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in 16th-century Brazil*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm.
- Walsham, A. (2008). The Reformation and “the Disenchantment of the World” Reassessed. *The Historical Journal*, 51(2), 497–528.
- Walsham, A. (2011). *Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, N. T. (1992). *The New Testament and the People of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/toni-morrison-the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison>

Roland Clark, Lecturer, University of Liverpool, researches lived religion in modern Romania and Eastern Europe; his most recent book is *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania*.

Luke Clossey, Associate Professor of History at Simon Fraser University, is writing a study of the cult of Jesus in the late-traditional world.

Simon Ditchfield is Professor of early modern/late traditional history at the University of York, U.K.; he is currently trying to finish a history of the making of Roman Catholicism as a world religion 1500-1700.

David M. Gordon is Professor of History at Bowdoin College, is the author of *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Ohio University Press, 2012), and is currently researching religious and political forms of sovereignty in central Africa prior to colonialism.

Arlen Wiesenthal is a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago; while his central focus lies in the Ottoman world and on the Ottoman dynasty, his work is more generally concerned with the ways that the cultural presence of dynastic institutions colour the experiences of imperial subjects.

Taymiya R. Zaman is a writer and historian at the University of San Francisco; her area of research expertise is Mughal India, and her recent work focuses on space, subjectivity, and historical memory in Pakistan and India.

How to cite this article: Clark R, Clossey L, Ditchfield S, Gordon DM, Wiesenthal A, Zaman TR. **The unbelieved and historians, part III: Responses and elaborations.** *History Compass*. 2017;e12430. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12430>